

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) has been in existence since June, 1966. During the past 33 years, it has undergone a series of transformations, both in terms of the states it serves and its mission. In November, 1995, SEDL was awarded a five-year, \$22.2 million Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) contract. Six programmatic goals were identified:

1. Enhancing family and community involvement in education;
2. Addressing diversity in language and culture;
3. Aligning and supporting policy development;
4. Promoting instructional coherence;
5. Applying technology to restructuring and learning; and
6. Changing the organization and management of schooling.

Within the current contract, SEDL has identified “addressing diversity in language and culture” (Goal 2) as a “specialty area.” In addition, for the purposes of the interim evaluation, two “signature programs” were identified. The Technical Assistance Program (TAP), Signature Program 1, is associated with Goal 5. The Collaborative Action Team (CAT) Program, Signature Program 2, is associated with Goal 1.

At present, SEDL employs 100 staff members: 20 in clerical, secretarial, and technical positions; 38 in professional positions; and 41 in supervisory or director positions. Seventy percent are White (not Hispanic), 19 percent are Hispanic; eight percent are Black (not

Hispanic), and the remaining three percent are Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American Indian, or Alaskan native. Seventy-one percent are female.

This interim evaluation is based on several sources of data. Prior to visiting SEDL, I skimmed through a box of material provided by the SEDL staff. I also had participated in a conference call during which Drs. Wesley Hoover and Joan Buttram. During my week long visit to SEDL I had opportunities to listen to a variety of presentations, talk with several SEDL staff members, and examine additional materials. The comments that follow are based on my reactions to what I have read, observed, and heard. I have organized my reactions around the eight research questions provided by Decision Information Resources (DIR), Inc. For each question I make a few comments (supported by the sources of data which engendered them), then discuss a few strengths, and finally offer a few recommendations.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is SEDL doing what it was supposed to do during their first three contract years?

Either the program of work outlined in the initial proposal has been executed or the modifications submitted to and approved by OERI have been executed (or are in the process of being executed).

SEDL lost about 1.5 years because of a change in CEO and the implementation of an internal review process (letter of resignation of former CEO sent to Board on April 25, 1996). On April 10-11, 1997, the Board gave “full support and confidence” for the internal review process [Selected Board Minutes]. By March, 1998, SEDL had in place an extensive compensation framework. The length of the internal review is open to question. Data supplied

by SEDL in the Briefing Booklet says March-April 1997. In his 5/10/99 interview Gil Garcia indicated the time frame was much longer, Spring, 1997, to early 1998. Joan Buttram (interview, 5/10/99) indicated that SEDL was meeting deadlines for deliverables 70-75 percent of the time. Gil Garcia (interview, 5/10/99) stated that there had been substantial improvement in the past seven to nine months. Prior to Joan Buttram's arrival (about 18 months into the current contract) not only were there delays in deliverables but the quality of the deliverables was questionable.

About 62 percent of the total SEDL funding is REL funding (Laboratory Background Data). Of the remaining 38 percent, the vast majority is federal money. Monies from REL and other sources are combined to fund three programs: Program for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning, Language and Diversity Program, and Technology Assistance Program. Two SEDL programs lie outside REL funding: Comprehensive Assistance Program and Special Education & Rehabilitation Services Program.

There are few external (that is, non-governmental) resources. The Board voiced a concern for diversification of funding. Their goal for 2000 was 70 percent government (federal and state), 15 percent philanthropy, and 15 percent market (e.g., LEAs) (Selected Board Minutes, 1995-98. Currently, more than 99 percent comes from government funding. Gil Garcia (telephone interview, 5/10) indicated that diversification of funding has not been a federal priority. He did say, however, that those Labs that have diversified have become stronger organizations. He also suggested that the language and cultural diversity goal may need additional external funding if it is to be accomplished. Furthermore, he asserted that SEDL is the "biggest player in the region" in this regard. [Note. The lack of addition resources are intriguing in light of the fact that several program noted their connections with various

foundations (e.g., Pew, Mott).]

All five CSSOs are on the Board. Some partnerships have been established with other RELs (Lab Network Program). Alliance with Regional Technical Assistance Center (RTAC) and various other “assistance centers” (e.g., technology, special education, desegregation). One difficulty noted by Joan Buttram (May 13, 1999, interview) is that not all these “assistance centers” serve the same region as SEDL serves. Finally, there are numerous informal partnership (interview with Joan Buttram and Wesley Hoover, May 13, 1999).

1. Strengths

1. The modifications made in original contract are consistent with reorganization and re-direction of SEDL following the internal review process.
2. Timeline and quality of deliverables have improved since the completion of the internal review process.
3. Good use of REL and non-REL funds to support SEDL’s programs.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. Other sources of funding beyond the Federal Government should be vigorously pursued.
2. The new organizational framework should be complemented with a conceptual framework that integrates work across programs. Our interview with Shirley Hord (May 13, 1999) suggests that discussions about such framework have taken place. At present there are many opportunities for collaboration across programs that are not being taken advantage of. One such framework is simply a nesting of classrooms within schools within communities. Within this framework, CAT focuses on community-school relations, FIRST focuses on schools, and TAP and Organizing for Diversity focuses on classrooms. It is likely that all four programs, therefore, can combine to improve student achievement. In contrast, no single program is likely to have a substantial impact.

B. To what extent is SEDL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

From January, 1997, through April, 1997, SEDL conducted an comprehensive program review (aka “internal review”). [See “Plan for SEDL’s Comprehensive Program Review, January 15, 1997; “Laboratory Background” in SEDL Brief Booklet, May 10-14, 1999.] As a result of that review, from September through November, 1997, changes were made in the programs and program offices. Concurrently and then subsequently, from August, 1997, through March, 1998, a new compensation framework was in place and staff were assigned to new positions. [Note. Although I believe that the long-term result of this self-assessment will be extremely positive (based on presentations by and discussions with staff members, the short-term impact is negative in terms of the quality and quantity of work done during this 15 month period. An example is Signature Program #1, the TAP program, where their first year’s work on Technology Planning was delayed by the comprehensive program review in the second year and refocused on Constructive Learning Environments in year three. Consequently, it was not until Spring, 1998, that their work in schools actually began. Nonetheless, the change was clearly needed. The Board (interview on May 10, 1999) gave the following rationale for the change. There was a need to improve SEDL’s image. The organization as too “top heavy.” The compensation package was “out of kilter.” There was a need to address new and emerging issues “out in the community.”

SEDL’s QA process, described in its original proposal, was fully implemented in March, 1996. QA activities have been documented in each of SEDL’s quarterly progress reports since that time. As of February 1999 a total of 98 reviews had been conducted of 77 unique products. The types of products reviewed include workshop and conference plans and agendas, invitations

to schools and communities to apply for participation in specific research designs, videos, and web-based products. [Taken from SEDL's response to questions about their Year 4 plan and documented during site visit, May 10-14, 1999; also extended example given during May 10, 1999, oral presentation; also, SEDL "Needs Assessment Procedures" document.]

QA process "allows for" external review. Whether such a review takes place depends on whether the program manager seems a need for it (interview with Wesley Hoover, May 13, 1999). There are several examples of external reviews being conducted (e.g., CAT modules, Organizing for Diversity modules). The Institutional Review Team has been reduced from three to one over time (with one departure and one death).

1. Strengths

1. The internal review process resulted in substantial and important changes.
2. The QA system is used to produce high quality products and services. Importantly, the QA system extends beyond SEDL to include clients and experts in the field.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. At present, external review is an option within the QA system to be used at the discretion of program managers. I would suggest that some form of external review be used for all products and services to which clients have access (e.g., modules, training sessions).
2. There is a need for a coherent, comprehensive database that enables SEDL to monitor the quality of work across programs and projects. This would provide opportunities to share work across programs and projects as well as to determine when integrating programs and projects at various sites may be useful or advantageous.

III. Quality

To what extent is SEDL developing high quality products and services?

For both "signature works" the development process began with a literature review (oral presentations, May 11-12, as well as copies of literature reviews in supplementary files). Both

underwent QA review, complete with external review. The TAP program included a pilot test in its development. In this way, input from practitioners was incorporated into module design.

There is a nice balance of quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Examples of qualitative work are: “Selected Field Feedback on Process and Materials” [Signature Work #2] and “Pilot and Field Test Feedback [Signature Work #1]. There also are examples of straight quantitative work (e.g., “Selected Participant Evaluations of Start-Up Orientation” [Signature Work #2.] Finally, there are examples that combine quantitative and qualitative work (e.g., “State of Sites Report” [Signature Work #1.]

The development approaches used are consistent with what is known in the area of staff and professional development as well as school change. For example, the need for a “critical mass” of committed teachers is recognized in Signature Work #1, TAP (oral presentation, May 11, 1999, and supportive documentation). Similarly, the need to adapt the CAT program to the needs of specific communities was recognized and acted upon (oral presentation, May 12, 1999, and supportive documentation).

Finally, surveys of clients (n = 797) suggest that 84 percent or more of the clients rated the quality of products and services to be excellent or good. [Unfortunately, the response rate was only 36 percent.]

1. Strengths

1. The quality of products and services is generally quite high.
2. State-of-the art knowledge, processes, and tools are used to design and implement products and services.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. Each product and service seems to be developed “from scratch” based on a literature review. A greater coordination among others working the field may enable the SEDL

staff to adapt existing products and services, rather than constantly producing their own.

2. More attention should be paid to the importance of the client survey, with greater effort made to increase the response rate to at least 50 percent.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by SEDL useful to and used by customers?

In combination, the two “Signature Works” are being delivered to 21 sites (6 for TAP, 15 for CAT). The sites for both “Signature Works” are in all five SEDL states. The duration differs according to the “Signature Works.” Signature Work #1 has been in the field for only one year. In contrast, Signature Work #2 has been in the field for three years. In addition, Signature Work #2 was based on work done during the prior five-year SEDL contract. Finally, “Organizing for Diversity” is in one site, “Promoting Instructional Coherence” is in five sites, and “Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement” is in one site.

Based on client interviews on May 11-12, 1999, SEDL conducts ongoing interaction with their clients/users. Also based on client interviews on May 11-12, 1999, SEDL’s products and services are both useful to and used by customers. In addition, client surveys (n = 797) suggest that SEDL products and services increased awareness and/or acquisition of the important new skills (77 percent) and informed decision making or planning (68 percent).

There are several publications that are available (e.g., Public Deliberations, Native Education Resources, the policy group’s Occasional Paper Series). In addition, there is a website featuring all programs and services. The website appears to be functional (in terms of the number of “hits”). Finally, e-mail and LISTSERVs are used to communicate with clients, board members, etc.

1. Strengths

1. Products and services are well received by the clients being served.
2. Responsiveness to clients is a major strength of the SEDL operation.
3. The combination of traditional publications, web pages, LISTSERVs, etc., increases the opportunities of others to access SEDL's products and services.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. As projects move toward dissemination, SEDL should explicitly address their role in dissemination. Questions such as the following should be answered: Are co-developers the key to dissemination? Is there a need for SEDL to engage in research on dissemination? Is there a need for SEDL to maintain some degree of involvement with their developmental sites beyond their "use" as intensive implementation sites?

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

Efforts are focused on "critical concentrations based on regional diversity" (REL Planning Process Document). Five critical concentrations are (1) rural delta, (2) border with Mexico, (3) Indian nations, (4) rural, and (5) urban (oral presentation, May 10, 1999, plus other sources).

An extensive "needs sensing" process is in place. It includes trend analysis, focus groups, surveys. (REL Planning Process Document). Also, with respect to Signature Program #1, TAP, schools were they first classified into one of four cells: low technology, low constructive learning environment; low technology, high constructive learning environment; high technology, low constructive learning environment; and high on both. Efforts were generally focused on schools in the low-low cell (oral presentation, May 11, 1999).

SEDL programs were determined using National Education Goals, REL Specialty Area, Comprehensive School Reform elements, Future Conditions of Education (FCE) survey, Board Provisionals, Communication Survey). Also, there are nine criteria to be met by each program initiative (e.g., strong contribution to the knowledge base, promise to make a positive difference

in lives of children, sensible and doable).

Pilot tests of each program are conducted (e.g., G5-Technology and Restructuring – Pilot Participant Feedback, June 8-9, 1998; oral presentations on Signature Work #1 and Signature Work #2, May 11-12, 1999). Also, two client-focused criteria are included in the QA. All products, publications, and services state must:

1. Meet an identified need and be likely to have a significant, positive impact on the intended audience, and
2. Be readily understandable and use for those for whom it is intended.

Finally, there is multi-year commitment to “intensive implementation sites” (oral presentation, May 10, 1999).

1. Strengths

1. SEDL is definitely focused on and responsive to customer needs.
2. There is in place an extensive “needs sensing” process (including trend analysis, focus groups, and surveys).

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. Some discussion should be held concerning the number of sites that can be properly served with current staff and budget. The intricate balance between quality and quantity must be addressed.
2. A matrix of programs by critical concentrations should be prepared so that one can see (1) that all critical concentrations are being served and (2) that the programs are being matched properly with the critical concentrations.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL’s work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

Concerns about lack of student data were voiced by several people/groups (e.g., Selected Board Minutes, 1995-98; Gil Garcia (COTR) during telephone interview on May 10, 1999; CAT

client interviews, May 12, 1999). In addition, client survey data (n = 797) indicate that only 23 percent of those surveyed said that SEDL products and services positively affected student performance. Achievement test data are ultimately needed, but other student data, appropriate to specific programs, are also needed (e.g., increase in school attendance or decrease in drug use for CAT program). From client perspective, such data are needed if they are to secure additional funding.

While he agreed that student success was important, Wesley Hoover suggested that the primary emphasis of SEDL work has been and will continue to be community and teacher professional development (several interviews conducted from May 10-14, 1999). In this regard, it is instructive to note the responses of 797 clients to one of the client survey questions. Only 40 percent indicated that SEDL products and services had changed or enhanced the quality of their professional practices.

CAT (Signature Work #2) has data provided by the schools that can be used to monitor impact over time. TAP (Signature Work #1) has narrative data on changes in teacher practices as well as data on student engagement. Perhaps the best example is “Organizing for Diversity” which gathers baseline data on four components (i.e., cultural knowledge, self-awareness, communication skills, and beliefs), then implements a year-long series of professional development seminars, and then collects data on the same four components at the end of that year.

Several clients interviewed on May 11-12, 1999, mentioned the importance of SEDL as a “catalyst for change.” In this regard, SEDL programs are extremely important to the populations being served. Specific examples include the importance of the CAT program in “giving voice to traditional voiceless people” (client interview, May 11, 1999) and helping

primarily white, female teachers deal with students from vastly different cultures (interview with Pat Guerra, May 13, 1999).

1. Strengths

1. The programs being operated by SEDL clearly address issues of regional and national significance.
2. There is a clear focus on increasing community and parental engagement in schools and improving the practice of teaching.
3. Evaluation plans have been written for each of the six primary SEDL goals.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. An applied research design should be built into every program and project. In this way, research questions will guide the effort, **baseline data will be collected**, and decisions ultimately will be made on the basis of effectiveness data.
2. Because of the importance of students in any effort to change or improve education, some type of student data should be gathered with respect to each program and project (e.g., behavior, attitude, achievement). Stated somewhat differently, each research agenda should include at least one research question pertaining to students. In this regard, it may be possible to prepare a menu of student variables (and, where necessary, instruments) from which project developers, co-developers, and clients can select.

B. To what extent does the REL assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

Concerns for and examples of “scaling up” are evident in the vast majority of SEDL’s work. Examples include the CAT in Albuquerque, NM, where they moved from 3 schools in a single “feeder system” to multiple “clusters” in three years. In addition, the use of co-developers in virtually every program ensures attention is paid to issues of scaling up.

Project FIRST and the “Professional Learning Community” Project, both headed up by Shirley Hord, are approaches to comprehensive school improvement. In addition, SEDL is part of the “School Change Collaborative” (an inter-Lab effort led by the Northwest Regional

Educational Laboratory). Finally, according to Shirley Hord, SEDL plans to be involved with the more than 250 schools in their region that will receive CSRD awards.

The State Policy Planning Service is SEDL's main thrust in influencing policy. The general approach is to influence policy by (1) bringing together policy makers across the five states (the Regional Policy Analysis and Advisors Network, (2) maintaining regular communication with them, and (3) through them, attempting to influence policy by providing them with appropriate, accurate, and "research-based" information (interview with Joyce Pollard, May 13, 1999).

1. Strengths

1. Concerns for "scaling up" are apparent in virtually every program and project. Efforts at building capacity (such as the CAT project) and efforts at using co-developers are very important in this regard.
2. Having Shirley Hord on the staff is central to the success of comprehensive school improvement strategies. She has both a national and international reputation; her work on school change and comprehensive school improvement is excellent.
3. SEDL's State Policy Planning Service provides useful information to policymakers, thus approaching comprehensive school improvement from a political/legislative perspective.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. At present, Goal 6 operates in isolation. A conceptual framework such as the one mentioned earlier would enable the efforts made with respect to Goal 6 to be integrated in an overall plan for community, school, teacher, and, ultimately, student improvement. Stated somewhat differently, a comprehensive effort at SEDL is needed if comprehensive school improvement in the field is to be possible.
2. There needs to be more sharing of expertise across goal areas.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

This is the weakest area in SEDL. There seems to be only one of two functional projects. There have been few publications and presentations over the past three years.

Much of SEDL's reputation rests with programs developed in the 1970s and 1980s and with individual staff members. There are several reasons for this state of affairs. First, the specialty area has been leaderless for some time. Second, some of the early projects were either completed or seen by management as unproductive. Third, concerns for dissemination of products designed and services provided during the current contract is premature at this time (interview with Wesley Hoover, May 10, 1999).

1. Strengths

1. The staff members assigned to the specialty area have expertise, are dedicated, and are conscientious.
2. The quality of the work produced is quite good, particularly since it was produced under less than optimal conditions (e.g., lack of leadership, one or two staff members per project).
3. The decisions to stop unproductive activities and efforts (e.g., Educator Exchange, the creation of a bi-national school) were good ones.

2. Recommendations for Improvement

1. It is absolutely imperative that a qualified, full-time leader for this Goal be employed.
2. Every effort should be made to develop this Goal in such a way that it becomes synonymous with SEDL at the national level. This may mean eliminating it as a Goal and having it as the "glue" that holds all the other goals together. [In this regard, there already is some evidence that this is in place.] This also means publishing papers and reports relative to this goal in national outlets.
3. It may be advantageous to separate cultural diversity from language diversity. In this way, it may be possible to separate Goal 2 from Task 7.

4. Finally, the short phrase currently used to denote this specialty area should be changed. At present it is written very passively. The new phrase should indicate its emphasis on improving the quality of school life for students whose language and cultural backgrounds differ from the language of instruction and the traditional white middle-class culture that dominates American public schools.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products, and Services

SEDL came out of the internal review process much stronger and more focused than they were going into it. As a consequence, they have a unique opportunity to redirect their time and efforts to accomplish great things in the region. The expertise and dedication of their staff are very high. The quality of their work is quite good. Their responsiveness to their clients and customers is a real strength.

At the same time, however, the internal review process and the changes in organization and personnel that resulted because of it took a year or more out of the first three years of this contract period. Consequently, they have a long way to go in a very short period of time.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths and Recommendations for Improvement

SEDL has numerous strengths. Among the most important are:

1. The quality of their leadership team;
2. The quality of their staff, in general;
3. The importance of their work;
4. The quality of their work;
5. Their responsiveness to their clients and customers;
6. Their relationship with their Board; and
7. The quality of their decision making process.

There are also some noteworthy areas of improvement. In this regard, I offer the following recommendations.

1. The vacant leadership positions in the specialty area and in evaluation must be filled immediately.
2. Despite the emphasis on community and teacher development, every effort must be made to place students at the heart of SEDL's work with communities and schools.
3. Sources of funding other than governmental funding should be vigorously pursued.
4. The new organizational framework should be completed with a conceptual framework that allows coordination and integration of efforts and expertise across programs.
5. During the next two years, SEDL must seriously address the issue of dissemination and their role in it. The transition from development to dissemination must be made very soon.
6. Every effort should be made to develop the "specialty area" in such a way that it becomes synonymous with SEDL at the regional and national level.